DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 721 CS 507 295

AUTHOR Wakefield, Gay
TITLE Roles Male and Female Public Relations Students Hope To Play within Ten Years after Graduation: A Pilot Study.
PUB DATE 11 May 89
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (76th, Chicago, IL, November 1-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Females; Males; *Professional Occupations; *Public Relations; *Sex Role; Speech Communication; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Communication Styles; *Professional Role

ABSTRACT

A pilot study was conducted to address the professional and personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play within 10 years after their graduations and to determine whether any differences were significant enough to warrant more extensive study of this phenomenon. The null hypotheses employed included: (1) there will be no significant differences between the professional roles male and female public relations students hope to play; and (2) there will be no significant differences between the personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play. Subjects, 25 senior-level public relations students at a large, public midwestern university, were asked to supply responses to the question "How do you see yourself and your role in the practice of public relations 10 years from now? Responses were coded according to Broom's four major public relations roles: expert prescriber, communication technician, problem-solving process facilitator, and communication facilitator. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between the number of male students hoping to play the eventual roles of problem-solving process facilitator, expert prescriber, and communication technician; rejecting the first null hypothesis in part. There were significantly more females than males who sought to play the role of communication facilitator en route to their eventual tenth-year roles. For those students desiring public relations careers, there were no significant differences between genders. The second null hypothesis failed rejection since there were no significant differences between the genders when the personal roles were identified. (Two tables of data are included.) (MG)

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Roles Male and Female Public Relations Students Hope to Play within Ten Years after Graduation:

A Pilot Study

by

Dr. Gay Wakefield
Associate Professor of Public Relations and Advertising, and
Director of the Public Relations Sequence
Dept. of Journalism
Butler University
4600 Sunset
Indianapolis, IN 46208
317/283-9357 (office)
317/298-7914 (home)

Presented on the Commission on Public Relations Panel
"Emerging Issues in an Uncertain World: Competitive Papers in Public Relations"
at the 1990 convention of the
Speech Communication Association
Chicago, IL

CS507395

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ABSTRACT

Of continuing discussion in the professional and educational public relations communities is the fact that, while the field of public relations in general includes a clear majority of female practitioners, male practioners continue to maintain a clear majority of public relations management positions in the United States. The prevailing explanation for male dominance in the management role is that women are socialized into self-selection of the communication technician role. This pilot study was designed to test this assertion. Based on the logical assumption that socialization of mind sets regarding professional and personal roles are established before individuals actually enter the professional arena, the purpose of this pilot study was to address the professional and personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after their graduations, and to determine whether any differences were significant enough to warrant more extensive study of this phenomenon.

Roles Male and Female Public Relations Students Hope to Play within Ten Years after Graduation: A Pilot Study

by

Gay Wakefield

Over the past few years, a good deal of attention has been paid to the effects of feminization on the public relations field. A major focus of this attention has been the fact that, while the field in general includes a majority of female practitioners, male practioners continue to maintain a clear majority of public relations management positions in the United States. This finding holds even when researchers control for the variables of age and years of experience.[1]

Women have been found primarily to fill the role of communication technician, providing the specialized skills (such as writing, editing, media relationS, special events coordination) necessary to public relations activities. Normally communication technicians are not a part of management, but rather the resource by which public relations programs are executed. Meanwhile men have been found primarily to fill managerial roles such as the role of expert prescriber, in which they are trusted by clients and organizational management to provide the research, problem definition, program

development and implementation essential to public relations management.[2]

Women clearly are excluded from managerial functions, such as decision-making, by their predominance in the role of communication technician.[3] The prevailing explanation for female dominance in this role, and male dominance in managerial public relations roles, is that women are socialized into self-selection of the communication technician role.[4] The "Velvet Ghetto" study's explanation is that "Part of the socialization process is a result of woman's lack of skills in negotiating a higher salary, an undervaluing of her worth as a worker, and, in general, a strong conflict over the role of professional and the roles of wife and/or mother."[5]

The experience of women in public relations management appears to mirror the experience of women in management in general in the United States. The "Velvet Ghetto" explanations for this experience seem to be reinforced by Wakefield's national research on female and male executives in U.S. organizations. In support of the "Velvet Ghetto" contention that women may suffer from a strong conflict over professional and personal goals, the Wakefield study revealed that future professional plans of female administrators differ

significantly from those of male administrators, with women desiring to stay in their present or equal positions and men desiring advancement (p=.0002).[6] The study also reinforced the "Velvet Ghetto" explanation that women undervalue their worth as workers, noting that "There was some support for the previous findings that women tend to rate themselves lower on achievement than do men, though their performance does not justify such a discrepant rating."[7] Wakefield also concluded that:

> Male administrators perceive themselves to have more power than do their female counterparts, but they do not establish their power images in manners that are substantially different from the women's methods.... Power perception is strongly related to perception of organizational communication effectiveness and to establishment of power image, reinforcing the possibility that men in administration overestimate their power within the organization while women underestimate theirs.[8]

If, as Broom and Dozier suggest, differing socialization for

males and females in the U.S. is the overriding explanation for differences between men and women in public relations management, it seems logical that mind sets regarding professional and personal goals would be established before individuals actually enter the professional arena. Hence, male and female public relations practitioners would have differing professional and personal goals from the time they graduate from college and actually enter the field.

The purpose of this pilot study was to address the professional and personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after their graduations, and to determine whether any differences were significant enough to warrant more extensive study of this phenomenon. The null hypotheses employed for this study included:

H_1 There will be no significant differences between the professional roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after graduation; and

H_2 There will be no significant differences between the personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after

graduation.

Methodology

Twenty-five senior-level public relations students at a large, public midwestern university were asked to provide, in a maximum of two double-spaced, typed pages, open-ended responses to the question, "How do you see yourself and your role in the practice of public relations ten years from now?" After forty-eight hours, the responses were collected for analysis.

After responses were gathered, they were coded according to Broom's four major public relations roles:[9]

1) Expert Prescriber. Filling the authority role regarding public relations problem solving, this practitioner is trusted by the client or organizational management as the public relations expert. S/he provides the research, problem definition, program development and implementation essential to public relations management.

2) Communication Technician. Providing the specialized skills necessary to carry out public relations programs, this practitioner's job is dependent on strong

technical skills, such as writing, editing, media relations, and special events coordination. S/he is not a part of the management staff, but handles the technical tasks while management focuses on problem solving.

3) Problem-Solving Process Facilitator. Working with others throughout the organization to solve public relations problems, this practitioner is a member of the management team. S/he is highly involved in high-level management, implementing all phases of the public relations program and facilitating other managers, and the organization in general, in rational problem solving.

4) Communication Facilitator. Acting as a liaison, interpreter and mediator for the organization and its publics, this practitioner maintains a continuous flow of two-way communication. S/he is concerned with overcoming barriers in order to keep communication channels open.

Qualitative judgments, rather than key-word codings, were employed in the coding process. Inter-coder reliability proved to be extremely high (.9600), requiring a tie-breaking coder for only one response.

The roles sought by each participant were tallied, with a

separate tally of the tenth-year roles desired, then all tallies were totalled by gender. Totals were then subjected to statistical analyses employing Chi Square Test of Goodness of Fit, with the .05 level of probability established for significance.

Results

Of the twenty-five participants, nine (36.00%) were male and sixteen (64.00%) were female. In general, their responses were very clear and showed previous thought and career consideration.

Table 1 reflects results pertaining to the hypotheses. The first null hypothesis (H_1 There will be no significant differences between the professional roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after graduation.) was rejected in part. There were no significant differences between the number of male students and the number of female students hoping to play the eventual roles (in rank order) of problem-solving process facilitator, expert prescriber, and communication technician. However, significantly more females than males ($p<.05$) sought to play the role of communication facilitator en route to their eventual tenth-year roles.

TABLE 1

Ranking of Roles Male and Female Public Relations Students Hoped to Play over the First Ten Years of Their Careers

Desired Roles	Male PR Students	Female PR Students	Chi Square Value
Professional Roles En Route to Tenth Year			
1. Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	5 (55.56%)	9 (56.25%)	.001
2. Expert Prescriber	4 (44.44%)	6 (37.50%)	.116
3. Communication Technician	2 (22.22%)	8 (50.00%)	1.852
4. Communication Facilitator	0 (00.00%)	6 (37.50%)	4.441*
5. Non-Public Relations Roles	3 (33.33%)	0 (00.00%)	6.061#
Tenth-Year Professional Roles			
1. Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	3 (33.33%)	6 (37.5%)	.043
2. Expert Prescriber	3 (33.33%)	5 (31.25%)	.011
3. Communication Facilitator	0 (00.00%)	4 (25.00%)	2.679
4. Non-Public Relations Roles	3 (33.33%)	0 (00.00%)	6.061#
5. Communication Technician	0 (00.00%)	1 (06.25%)	.586
Personal Roles			
1. Family Person	2 (22.22%)	8 (50.00%)	1.852
2. Graduate Student	3 (33.33%)	5 (31.25%)	.011
3. Community Leader	2 (22.22%)	2 (12.50%)	.405
4. Investor	0 (00.00%)	3 (18.75%)	1.918

* indicates $p \leq .050$
\# indicates $p \leq .025$

For those students desiring public relations careers, there were no significant differences between genders regarding tenth-year roles sought. In rank order, preferences were to fill the roles of expert prescriber, communication technician, problem-solving process facilitator, and communication facilitator. While none of the female public relations students sought non-public relations careers, three of the males (33.33%; $p<.025$) planned to be involved in non-public relations roles. The roles these men desired were university baseball coach, stock broker, and real estate/insurance broker.

Students identified the personal roles they hope to play as (in rank order) family person, graduate student, community leader, and investor. No significant differences surfaced between the genders, so the second null hypothesis (H_2 There will be no significant differences between the personal roles male and female public relations students hope to play within the first ten years after graduation.) failed rejection.

The students' open-ended responses frequently included statements concerning the types of organizations for which they would like to work over the ten years following graduation. Those preferences, summarized in Table 2, produced no significant differences

between male and female students. Twelve students (48.00%) expressed hope to work in agency/firm public relations, while eight (32.00%) planned to seek corporate public relations roles. Four students (16.00%) planned to become educators, either in training and development programs or in university public relations programs. Public relations positions with an international focus were named by three students (12.00%), and three others (12.00%) planned to seek public relations roles in the travel industry. Politics (8.00%), government (8.00%), medicine (8.00%), sports (8.00%), and the recording industry (8.00%) were the fields of public relations practice chosen by two students each. One student (4.00%) discussed the possibility of beginning her career in not-for-profit public relations, then moving into an agency/firm role.

Discussion

Both male and female responses revealed careful consideration of professional options and included specific career progression plans for reaching their desired tenth-year roles. This pilot study revealed some interesting results which justify further research employing larger and more varied sample populations to

determine whether the findings reported here are generalizable.

TABLE 2

Ranking of Types of Organizations in which Male and Female Public Relations Students Wanted To Work within Ten Years following Graduation

Desired Roles	Male PR Students	Female PR Students	Chi Square Value
1. Agency/Firm	5 (55.57%)	7 (43.75%)	.322
2. Corporate	2 (22.22%)	6 (37.50%)	.618
3. Educator	2 (22.22%)	2 (12.50%)	.405
4. International	0 (00.00%)	3 (18.75%)	1.918
5. Travel	0 (00.00%)	3 (18.75%)	1.918
6. Political	1 (11.11%)	1 (06.25%)	.185
7. Governmental	1 (11.11%)	1 (06.25%)	.185
8. Medical	1 (11.11%)	1 (06.25%)	.185
9. Sports	1 (11.11%)	1 (06.25%)	.185
10. Entertainment	1 (11.11%)	1 (06.25%)	.185
11. Not-for-Profit	0 (00.00%)	1 (06.25%)	.586

* indicates $p \leq .050$
\# indicates $p \leq .025$

This pilot study sheds doubt on previous explanations by Broom and Dozier[10] that the failure of women to enter management positions is due primarily to socialization and self-selection into

technician roles, unless that socialization is occurring after public relations careers are begun. Further, the "Velvet Ghetto" study's reported "strong conflict over the role of professional and the roles of wife and/or mother"[11] and Wakefield's conclusion that "future professional plans of female administrators differ significantly from those of male administrators, with women desiring to stay in their present or equal positions and men desiring advancement"[12] were not supported by the results of this study.

Perhaps younger female practitioners are less likely than their predecessors to commit themselves primarily to hearth and home, and secondarily to careers. Or perhaps younger male practitioners are more likely than their predecessors to consider family concerns before career concerns. It is also possible that women enter public relations assuming they can "have it all", then later discover that they cannot have it all at the same time. Hopefully, future studies will delve further into this area.

The "Velvet Ghetto" concern that women lack negotiation skills and undervalue their worth as workers[13] -- along with Wakefield's conclusions that women perceive themselves to have less organizational power than their male counterparts, and that female

executives unjustifiably rate their professional performance lower than men rate theirs[14] -- may be closer to the mark than the socialization premise as explanations for male dominance in public relations management. Differences in the negotiating skills of men and women in public relations should be seriously investigated, as should male and female self-perceptions of professional worth and power in the public relations field.

Differences may exist in other areas as well. Some of the research questions which might provide revealing information include:

1. Are there differences between male and female public relations practitioners' attitudes toward, approaches to, and responses to organizational politics?
2. Do men and women in public relations employ different decision-making styles?
3. Are there gender differences in interpersonal communication styles which are working against women who wish to enter public relations management?
4. Are there gender differences in linguistic communication styles which are working against women who wish to enter public relations management?

5. Is maintenance of the "old boy" system creating discrimination (either conscious or subconscious) against the admission of women into the management ranks of public relations?

Further research is needed to address such questions.

NOTES

[1]Glen Broom, "A Comparison of Sex-Roles in Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 8 (Fall, 1982), pp. 17-22; Glen Broom and David Dozier, "Advancement for Public Relations Role Models," *Public Relations Review* 12 (Spring, 1986), pp.37-56; International Association of Business Communicators, *The Velvet Ghetto: The Impact of the Increasing Percentage of Women in Public Relations and Business Communication* (San Francisco: IABC Foundation, 1986).

[2]Broom, *Ibid.*; Broom and Dozier, *Ibid.*

[3]Broom, *Op. cit.*; Broom and Dozier, *Op. cit.*

[4]Broom and Dozier, *Op. cit.*; International Association of Business Communicators, *Op. cit.*

[5]International Association of Business Communicators, *Op. cit.*, p. X-2.

[6]D. Gay Wakefield, Perceptions of Organizational Communication and Power Among Female and Male Administrators, a doctoral dissertation (Commerce, TX: East Texas State University, 1983), pp. 71-72.

[7]*Ibid*, p. 217.

[8]*Op cit.*, pp. 214-15.

[9]Broom, *Op. cit.*

[10]Broom and Dozier, *Op. cit.*; International Association of Business Communicators, *Op. cit.*

[11]International Association of Business Communications, *Op. cit.*

[12]Wakefield, *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

[13]International Association of Business Communicators, *Op. cit.*, p. X-2.

[14]Wakefield, Op. cit., pp. 214-15, 217.